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ABSTRACT

This 32-page teaching guide accompanies a 55-minute documentary film, structured to be viewed in 1 or 2 classroom sessions. The film relates the story of the 1842 mutiny and hangings aboard the "U.S. Brig Somers." The guide recommends the film for grades 5-8, high school, college, and general audience. It suggests that the film material is appropriate for the study of U.S. history, U.S. literature, psychology, law, geography, underwater archeology, and naval and maritime history. The guide is divided into 11 sections, as follows: The Making of the Documentary Film; The U.S. Brig Somers--A Shipwreck from the Mexican War; The Mutiny, Herman Melville & Billy Budd; The Controversy; The Mexican War; Underwater Archeology; Characters in the Documentary Film--19th Century; Characters in the Documentary Film--20th Century; Traditional Music and Sea Shanties; Vocabulary and Terminology; and Recommended Bibliography. Appended are a number of laudatory letters regarding the film. Contains 15 references. (NKA)

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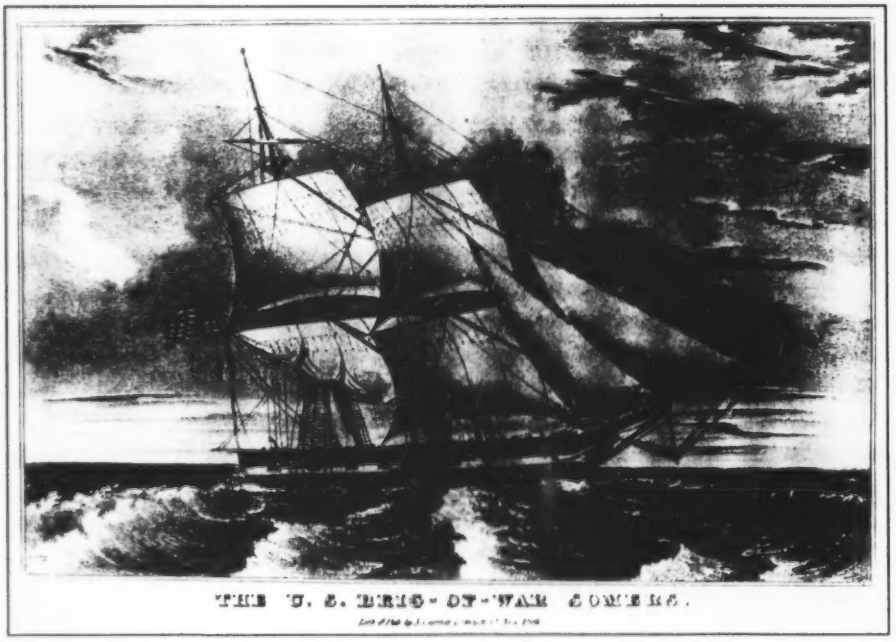
THE CURSE OF THE SOMERS

BILLY BUDD'S GHOST SHIP



THE U. S. BRIG-OF-WAR SOMERS.

An Educational Guide To The Documentary Film

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SHOWING THE DOCUMENTARY FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship has a program time of 55 minutes. The documentary film is structured to be viewed in either one or two classroom sessions. The film is organized into the following sections, and each section, starting with Mutiny Or Murder?, begins with a sub-title:

Beginning of the Film
Mutiny Or Murder?
The Last Novel
A Martyred Hero
Aftermath And Legacy

Finding A Ghost Ship
An Archaeologist's Dream
Bitterness
Cooperation

For teachers who wish to show the documentary film in two class sessions, a logical break point is at the end of the section, Aftermath And Legacy. This showing is 29 minutes in length.

The second class session should begin with the section, Finding A Ghost Ship, and continue to the end of the film for a total time of 26 minutes.

The film is recommended for Grades 5 - 8, High School, College and General Audience. ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship*** and its Educational Guide offer teachers, students and the general audience unique material for the study and understanding of American history, American literature, psychology, law, geography, underwater archaeology, naval and maritime history.

Table of Contents

3 The Making Of The Documentary Film

4 The U.S. Brig Somers - A Shipwreck From The Mexican War

14 The Mutiny, Herman Melville & Billy Budd

16 The Controversy

17 The Mexican War

20 Underwater Archaeology

22 Characters In The Documentary Film - 19th Century

26 Characters In The Documentary Film - 20th Century

28 Traditional Music & Sea Shanties

29 Vocabulary & Terminology

30 Recommended Bibliography

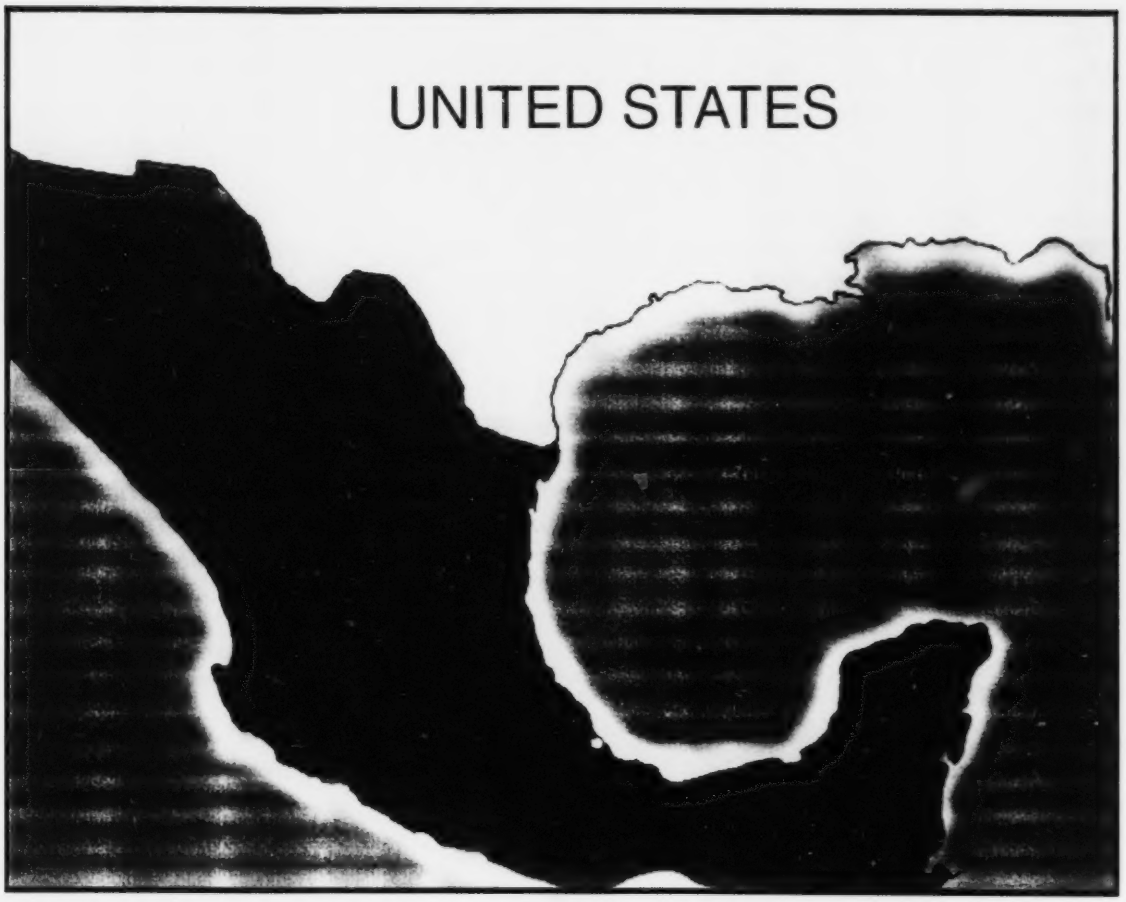

Figure 1

Figure 2
Refitted in 1990, the *U.S. Brig Niagara* is the last remaining vessel from the War of 1812 and the flagship of the State of Pennsylvania

The Making Of The Documentary Film

The 55 minute documentary film, ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship,*** narrated by the actor Peter Coyote, relates the infamous history of the 1842 mutiny and hangings aboard the *U.S. Brig Somers*. As a result of this tragedy the U.S. Navy founded the U.S. Naval Academy three years later. Herman Melville, the cousin of the *Somers's* second-in-command, would be inspired by the *Somers* Mutiny Affair to write his great novel, *Billy Budd.*

Four years after the mutiny the *Somers* was lost off the coast of Mexico during the opening months of the Mexican War. The documentary follows the 1986 expedition that discovered the *Somers* shipwreck in 110 feet of water five miles off the Mexican port of Veracruz (see Figure 1) and explores the ship's ominous past and the events surrounding her sinking.

Many 19th century photographs and prints are used to tell the *Somers* story. *Victory At Sea*, a musical group from Seattle, produced an original soundtrack of traditional 19th century music and sea shanties for the film. Excellent footage of the *U.S. Brig Niagara* under sail is one highlight of the documentary. The *Niagara* is an 1812 brig-of-war that the State of Pennsylvania refitted in 1990 at a cost of $3,000,000 (see Figure 2). The *Niagara* is almost identical to the *Somers* in size and sail configuration, and it portrays the *Somers* in the documentary film.

Rare interviews are conducted with Captain Edward Beach, USN (Ret.), author of *Run Silent, Run Deep* and *The United States Navy - 200 Years*; with Philip McFarland, author of *Sea Dangers - The Affair of the Somers*; and with James Delgado, former Maritime Historian for the U.S. National Park Service and current Executive Director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum. Dr. Mitch Marken, underwater archaeologist, describes the *Somers* shipwreck in a section, *An Archaeologist's Dream.*

George Belcher of San Francisco, who discovered the *Somers* with his brother Joel, has written and directed this documentary film. It was edited by Tom Bullock of Fire/Water Films, San Francisco. Underwater footage of the shipwreck was filmed by veteran underwater cinematographer Marty Snyderman of San Diego, California.

In 1990, archaeologists from the U.S. National Park Service and Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology and History met in Veracruz and surveyed and mapped the *Somers* shipwreck. This expedition was filmed and is integrated into the documentary.

The U.S. Brig Somers - A Shipwreck From The Mexican War

The Past...

OnDecember 8, 1846, during the opening months of the Mexican War, one of the U.S. Navy's most famous (or infamous) warships, the U.S. Brig Somers, capsized in a sudden storm off Veracruz, Mexico, sending 32 of her crew to a watery grave. This tragedy marked the end of a short but star-crossed history of mutiny, controversy and mystery that surrounded the Somers.

On June 2, 1986, after several months of archival research, and after one unsuccessful magnetometer search in March 1986, an expedition led by George and Joel Belcher found the remains of the Somers approximately five miles off Veracruz in 110 feet of water.

The U.S. Brig *Somers* was launched on April 16, 1842, at the New York Naval Yard. *Somers* and her sister ship, *Bainbridge* (built in Boston and also launched in 1842), were designed by Samuel Humphreys and based on the Baltimore clipper model. The *Somers* was designed for speed and was not a large vessel. She measured 102 feet overall, 25 feet at the beam and had a depth of hold of 11 feet. While pierced for 14 guns, she only carried ten 32-pounder carronade cannons. The *Somers's* hull was protected from the teredo shipworm with sheets of copper sheathing, probably in sheet sizes of 14 x 48 inches.

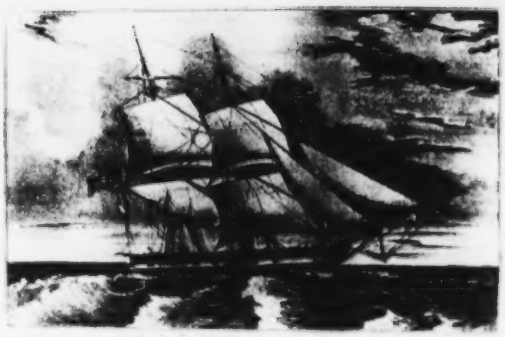

Figure 4 - Lithograph by Nathaniel Currier, 1843.

A 38 inch, 1/48 scale model of the *Somers* has been constructed by Andy Lovas of San Francisco. Mr. Lovas' model (see Figure 3) is based on Howard Chapelle's original drawings of the *Somers* that are in the Smithsonian Institution where Chapelle was Curator of Water Transportation. The drawings are also reproduced in Chapelle's *The History of American Sailing Ships.* Chapelle believed that the *Somers* and the *Bainbridge* were very much over-rigged (both vessels did eventually capsize and founder)with the *Somers* sinking off Veracruz in 1846 and the *Bainbridge* off Cape Hatteras in 1863. Andy Lovas, using

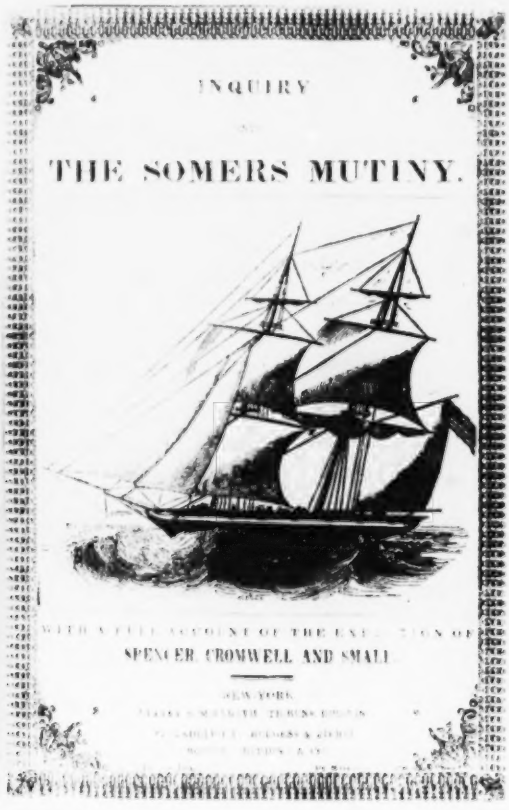

Figure 5 - Illustration, New York Weekly Tribune, January 21, 1843.

Figure 3 - Model of U.S. Brig Somers.

Chapell's sail plans and the U.S. Navy Sparring System of 1840, has calculated that the mainmast of the *Somers* measured 85 feet above the deck.

There are two visual representations of the *Somers* dating from 1843 - a Nathaniel Currier lithograph that was issued following the famous mutiny on the *Somers* (see Figure 4) and an illustration from the January 21, 1843 *New York Weekly Tribune* (see Figure 5) also reporting on the mutiny affair. A color lithograph of *Somers* was published in 1973 by Melbourne Smith in *Brigs and Sloops of the American Navy*. Smith's lithograph is also based on Chapelle's plans for the *Somers*.

While much has been written about the *Somers* mutiny of 1842, the following is a brief review of its history. A 1995 book, *Sea Dangers - The Affair of the Somers*, by Philip McFarland is recommended. Another book, Harrison Hayford's 1959 *The Somers Mutiny Affair - A Book of Primary Source Materials*, is an excellent resource for contemporary documents and images that relate to the *Somers* mutiny episode.

On September 13, 1842, the *Somers* left New York on a training cruise to the Atlantic coast of Africa. Under the command of Captain Alexander Slidell MacKenzie (see Figure 6), the brother-in-law of Commodore Matthew C. Perry, the *Somers's* voyage was the first attempt by the U.S. Navy to train apprentice seamen and midshipmen at sea. When she sailed, she carried a total of 120 men - 3/4 of the crew aboard were 19 years of age or younger.

Captain Mackenzie was evidently a stern disciplinarian as 43 separate floggings were administered aboard the *Somers* during the first three weeks of the voyage. Within a six months period aboard the *Somers* - on a shakedown cruise in early summer and on the second voyage in September - Captain Mackenzie ordered 2,265 lashes across the backs of mostly boys.

After two months at sea, 18 year old midshipman Philip Spencer (see Figure 7), the son of Secretary of War John Canfield Spencer, either through immaturity or malice, began weaving tales of mutiny and piracy. One of

Figure 6
Commander Alexander Slidell Mackenzie.

Figure 7
Midshipman Philip Spencer.

the crew reported Spencer's plans, and Captain Mackenzie ordered that Spencer be arrested and manacled on deck. Two other crew members were later arrested as fellow mutineers. A drumhead court-martial delivered the verdict, and on December 1, 1842, midshipman Philip Spencer, boatswains mate Samuel Cromwell, and seaman Elijah Small were hanged from the main yardarm of the *Somers* (see Figure 8).

Figure 9
Herman Melville, 1861.

The *Somers* mutiny affair and the subsequent court-martial proceedings became extremely controversial. James Fenimore Cooper, the popular author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, publicly accused Mackenzie of murder. Richard Henry Dana, Jr., attorney and author of *The Seaman's Friend* and the enormously successful *Two Years Before the Mast*, published in 1840, supported Mackenzie's actions.

Captain Mackenzie was later tried at a court-martial on five charges, including murder and was eventually acquitted. "Not proven" was the verdict. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison has called the *Somers* affair the most sensational trial in America involving an individual that preceded the assassination of President Lincoln. The *Somers* mutiny and its negative publicity, according to Thomas C. Gillmer, N.A., was of such embarrassment to the U.S. Navy in the nineteenth century that it became a point of etiquette among Naval officers never to discuss the matter. Despite its tragic history, one important benefit resulted from the failure of the *Somers*'s training voyage: as a direct result, the U.S. Navy founded the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland in 1845.

Figure 8

Collection of the New-York Historical Society

The *Somers* mutiny became literary history when Herman Melville (see Figure 9), cousin of the *Somers*'s second-in-command, became obsessed with the *Somers* affair. Melville's cousin, Guert Gansevoort, had been in charge of the drumhead court-martial that sentenced the three alleged mutineers to hang, and Melville's obsession culminated in his completion of *Billy Budd* in early 1891. Five months later, on September 28, 1891, Melville died. Herman Melville referred specifically to the *Somers* mutiny in both *Billy Budd* and *White Jacket*.

Melville, in *Billy Budd*, writes:

Not unlikely they were brought to something more or less akin to that harassed frame of mind which in the year 1842 actuated the commander of the U.S. brig-of-war Somers to resolve, under the so-called Articles of War, Articles modeled upon the English Mutiny Act, to resolve upon the execution at sea of a midshipman and two sailors as mutineers designing the seizure of the brig. Which resolution was carried out though in a time of peace and within not many days' sail of home. An act vindicated by a naval court of inquiry subsequently convened ashore. History, and here cited without comment.

After the mutiny, the *Somers* acquired the reputation of a cursed and unlucky ship that many considered haunted by the ghosts of the hanged mutineers. Midshipman Robert Rogers, transferred to the *Somers* shortly before she was lost off Veracruz, wrote in his memoirs, published in 1890:

My fellow youngsters consoled with me on a change so regrettable and inauspicious. Get rid of that craft as soon as you can, for sooner or later she's bound to go to the devil. Since the mutiny, damn bad luck goes with her.

Figure 10 - Rafael Semmes, circa 1845.

Figure 12 - Lithograph by Casimiro Castro, 1846.

Figure 11 - Rafael Semmes, circa 1862.

In 1846, the *U.S. Brig Somers* was assigned to the Home Squadron during the opening months of the Mexican War (U.S. Navy ships engaged in the war on the West coast were assigned to the Pacific Squadron). Soon thereafter, the *Somers* sailed to Veracruz, Mexico, and under the command of Lt. Cmdr. Raphael Semmes (see Figure 10) was assigned the responsibility of blockading the port. Semmes would later be a famous naval hero for the Confederate States of America as the commmander of *C.S.S. Alabama* (see Figure 11).

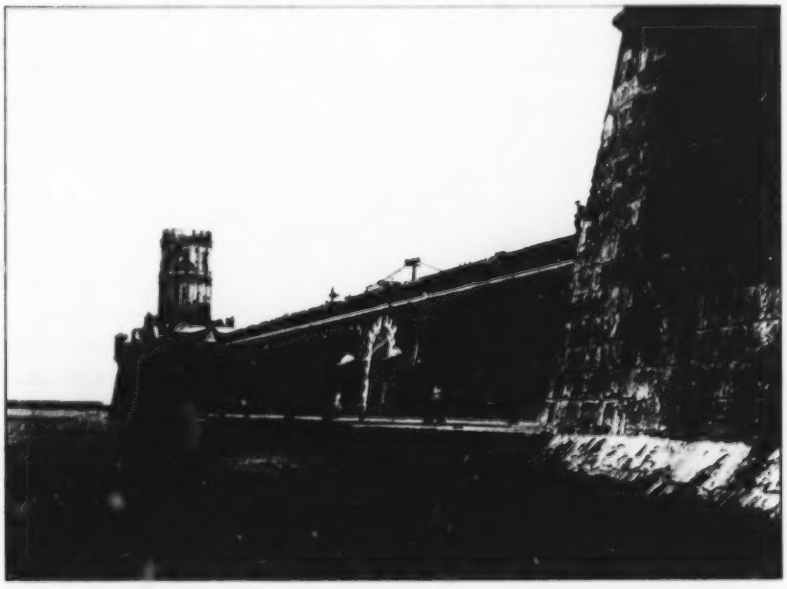

Figure 13 - Fort San Juan de Ulua, Veracruz.

Veracruz in 1846 was a walled city (see Figure 12), although all that remains of the original wall today is one bastion, Baluarte de Santiago. Cortes landed in Veracruz in 1519, and although he founded the first "Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz" (The Rich City of the True Cross) some 45 miles to the north, today's Veracruz became Mexico's principal port in 1599. Construction of the famous Spanish fortress, San Juan de Ulua, located in the harbor of Veracruz (see Figure 13) was started in the 1540's.

On December 8, 1846, while chasing a Mexican ship attempting to run the blockade of Veracruz, the *Somers* was thrown on her beam ends in a sudden gale and sank within ten minutes. The New Orleans Picayune carried a front page story on December 22, 1846, entitled "Late From the Squadron - Total Wreck of the U.S. Brig Somers - Great Loss of Life" (see Figure 14). A news story on the loss of the *Somers* appeared in the Illustrated London News on January 23, 1847 (see Figures 15 & 16).

Two days after the tragedy, Lieutenant Commander Semmes, having survived the sinking, filed the following report to Commodore Matthew C. Perry, Second-In-Command, Home Squadron:

Sir: It becomes my painful duty to inform you of the loss of the U.S. Brig Somers, late under my command, and of the drowning of more than half her crew.

Semmes states that his second-in-command, Lieutenant Parker, remarked to him that it looked a little squally to windward:

Lieutenant Parker took the mainsail off her, and had got the spanker about half hrailed up, when the squall struck us. The brig being flying light, having scarcely any water or provisions, and but six tons of ballast on board, she was thrown over almost instantly...When she was on the point of sinking beneath us, and engulfing us in the waves, I gave the order, "Every man save himself who can".

Out of 76 officers and crew, 37 were rescued and 39 were lost - 32 drowned and seven were captured ashore by the Mexicans. A later court of inquiry on the sinking acquitted Semmes from any responsibility for the *Somers*'s loss.

Two final footnotes to this history are: three months after the *Somers* was lost, Lt. Commander Semmes would manage the Navy surf boats (see Figure 17) when more than 10,000 men were landed ashore south of Veracruz in less than five hours in one of the most daring and successful amphibious operations in U.S. military history, and on March 24, 1847, both Semmes and Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, former captain of the *Somers* during the mutiny, were in charge of the 32-pound guns at the U.S. Naval Battery (see Figure 18) that breached the walls of Veracruz.

Figure 14 Engraving after painting, 'Mexican War News', by Richard Caton Woodville

Figure 17 - Lithograph by Nathaniel Currier, 1847

Figure 15 - From Illustrated London News, January 23, 1847

Figure 16 - From Illustrated London News, January 23, 1847.

WRECK OF THE UNITED STATES BRIG "SOMERS."

THIS melancholy loss took place on the 13th of last month, whilst the vessel was maintaining the blockade off the harbour of Vera Cruz. The circumstances are detailed by an eye-witness, in a long letter to the *New Orleans Picayune*, whence we extract the following details:—

On the evening of the 7th the *Somers* had taken shelter under Green Island, there being the usual appearance indicating a norther. Early in the morning of the 8th, a sail was reported from aloft. Captain Semmes got under way to chase, and stood out some miles, until he made out the *John Adams*, being on her return from Tampico.

As the wind had already hauled to the north, and the weather was threatening, Captain Semmes at once ran back to Green Island, intending to anchor as soon as he could regain his former berth.

On approaching the anchorage another sail was discovered, apparently standing down for Vera Cruz, through the passage between Green Island and Blanquilla Shoal, with the intention, as was supposed, of running the blockade. Apprehending that the strange vessel might succeed in her design, Captain Semmes was induced to change his purpose and run by Green Island, standing across the passage, to intercept her, making short tacks between the reefs. The wind was then freshening from the north-west; but Captain Semmes hoped to be able to maintain his position until the suspicious vessel approached, and to cut her off from Vera Cruz. To effect this object it was necessary to press the *Somers* with canvass, in order to avoid falling to leeward upon the reefs, and finally to fetch Green Island anchorage.

Figure 18 - 'Bombardment of Veracruz', lithograph, 1851, by Adolphe-Jean-Baptiste Bayot after Carl Nebel who probably copied Henry Walke's 1848 lithograph of the same subject

The Present...

Late in 1984, George Belcher of San Francisco, an art dealer in Mexican paintings and an underwater explorer, was asked by Governor Acosta Lagunes of the State of Veracruz to search for historic shipwrecks around the port of Veracruz. In early 1985, while he was in Washington, D.C., George Belcher came across an old map in the Library of Congress. This *Mapa de Los Estados Unidos de Mexico*, issued by John Disturnell in 1847, and later used in negotiating the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican War, has a small inset of the port and reefs of Veracruz that shows a sinking ship with the notation "Loss of the U.S. Brig Somers Dec. 8,1846" (see Figure 19). Seeing this map began a fascinating research and ocean search project to find the shipwreck of the *U.S. Brig Somers*.

Using Raphael Semmes's after-action report on the loss of the *Somers*, Belcher learned that the *Somers*, after tacking toward the Pajaros reef (see Figure 20), capsized while on a larboard or port tack with the northern point of Green Island or Isla Verde reef a couple of points off her lee-bow.

In March 1986, the Belcher team set up a Brunton compass and two-way radios on Isla Verde island and methodically conducted a magnetometer search over the presumed wreck site area. They had no success.

Frustrated, George Belcher travelled once again to Washington, D.C. for more research in the U.S. National Archives. There he finally obtained the Proceedings of the Naval Court of Inquiry on the loss of the *Somers*. From these, he learned that the sinking site was west of Isla Verde about one mile, and that the *Somers* was lost in about 17 fathoms of water, or 102 feet. In May 1986, the team repeated the same search pattern, but added weights to the magnetometer line in order to run it deeper. On June 2, during a driving rain storm, the magnetometer registered an anomaly in 110 feet of water. Using SCUBA gear, George and his brother Joel dove directly to the *Somers* shipwreck.

In 20 exciting minutes, they swam the length of the wreck seeing encrusted carronade cannons, numerous intact ceramic vessels and glass bottles, and a myriad of unidentifiable encrusted objects. This would be their only dive on the site until many months later.

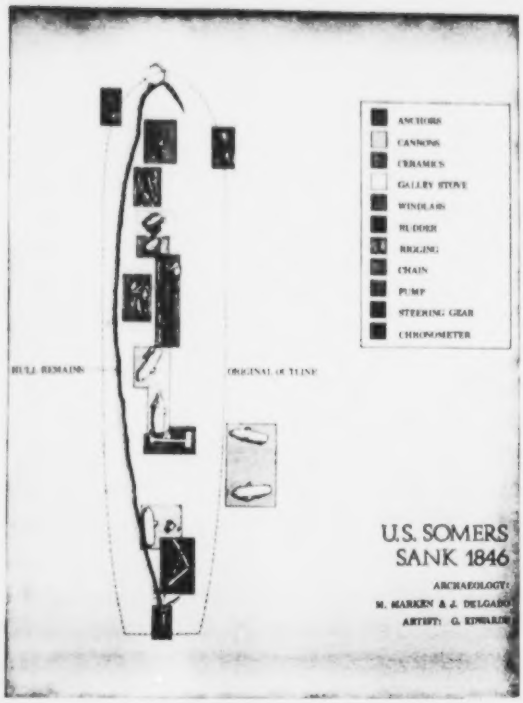

Figure 21

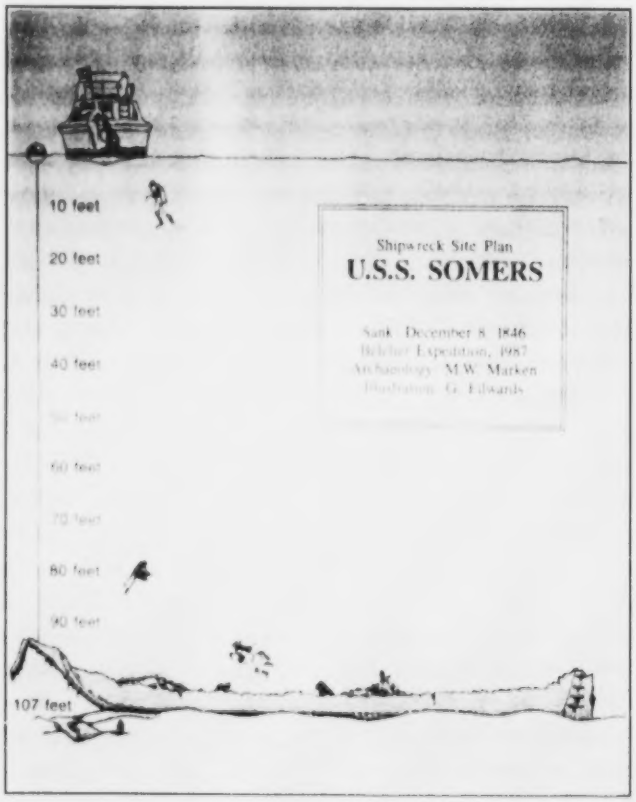

Figure 22

In May 1987, George and Joel returned to the *Somers* site with a film crew and with two shipwreck archaeologists, Jim Delgado and Dr. Mitch Marken. Although diving was limited because of the frequent bad weather of Veracruz, especially the famous norther, or "norte", Jim Delgado, then the Maritime Historian for the U.S. National Park Service, was able to confidently identify the wreck as the *U.S. Brig Somers*. Dr. Marken, then with the Institute of Maritime Studies, University of St. Andrews, Scotland, was able to finish a preliminary archaeological survey of the shipwreck (see Figures 21 & 22).

Dr. Marken, assisted by Jim Delgado, Joel Belcher and Neil Gibbs, layed a baseline and measuring tape from the remains of the stem post sheathing to the remains of the rudder. Rising from one to three feet off the wreckage, this line also served as a visual guide in the one to five feet visibility. In the short time allotted, it was possible to use right angle offsets from the baseline to record the visual outline of the hull and several prominent features. Dr. Marken describes the shipwreck:

The interior of the Somers wreck is literally filled with thousands of artifacts and rigging components. Studying our preliminary site plan that serves as a guide to identifiable and distinct features of the wreck, one can locate the two anchors off the port and starboard bow; not illustrated but omnipresent throughout the wreck are the rows and rows of spikes that have fallen neatly on top of each other and have stacked just inside the copper sheathing. Running from bow to stern are a concentration of ceramics and ship's fittings, the galley stove, the windlass and rows of stowed chain. Six of the ten 32-pounder Carronades are outlined as well as the ship's pump assembly. The steering gear was also indentified as well as a beautifully preserved chronometer. It is very possible that an enormous quatity of wreck remains lie under the silt off the starboard side.

Beginning in late 1986, George Belcher began attempts to protect the *Somers* from indiscriminate salvage and destruction by local divers and others. On February 11, 1987, Dr. Pilar Luna Erreguerena, Head of the Department of Underwater Archaeology for Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology and History, told George that her office would do everything possible to protect the *Somers* shipwreck if only the United States government would officially notify Mexico that the wreck was considered important to American history and worthy of preservation as an archaeological site and war grave.

On November 6, 1987, a Diplomatic Note from the U.S. State Department's Ocean Law and Policy section was sent to Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs requesting protection and stating that the U.S. Navy still had claims of sovereignty on the *Somers*. As Jim Delgado, currently the Executive Director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum, explains:

Under international law, ships that are warships are essentially the sovereign territory of the nation whose flag they fly. What that means is that the Somers, as a U.S. warship, was part of the United States afloat, and even though she sank, she remains a part of the United States to this day. So the United States has been pursuing with the Somers to have Mexico recognize that fact and to have the United States get its title back to the wreck of the Somers.

Setting aside the legal issue of ownership of the shipwreck, the United States and Mexico finally agreed to a cooperative approach to work on the *Somers*. In July 1990, both countries organized the first joint government underwater archaeological expedition ever undertaken in the Americas.

Underwater archaeologists from the U.S. National Park Service and from Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology and History met in Veracruz to dive on the *Somers* and to study and map the shipwreck. The Mexican Navy provided logistical support and backup divers. George and Joel Belcher joined the expedition and directed the group to the *Somers* site.

U.S. National Park Service underwater archaeologists Larry Nordby, Jerry Livingston and Jim Delgado surveyed the shipwreck and produced a detailed map of the *Somers* site (see Figure 23). This 1990 survey identified and mapped more features of the shipwreck, "developing a 'footprint' of the wreck site that should produce a detailed baseline for future study of Somers material culture" (James Delgado, 1990 Trip Report, U.S. National Park Service, Veracruz, Mexico).

Both governments continue to discuss the *Somers's* case, although the legal issue of ownership has not been resolved. Mexico has agreed to cooperate with the United States on any future projects on the *Somers*. The U.S. National Park Service and the U.S. Navy continue to express an interest in a major documentation study of the *Somers* site, but no date for the study has yet been announced.

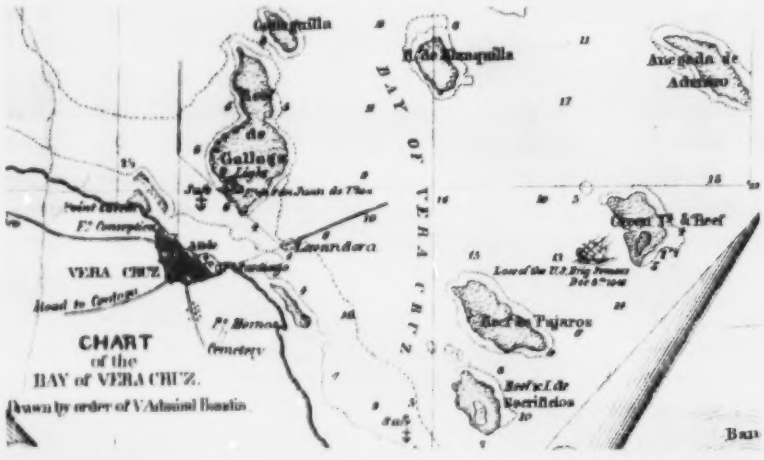

Figure 19 - Inset of 'Mapa de Los Estados Unidos de Mexico', issued by John Disturnell in 1847, showing 'Loss of the U.S. Brig Somers Dec. 8th 1846'

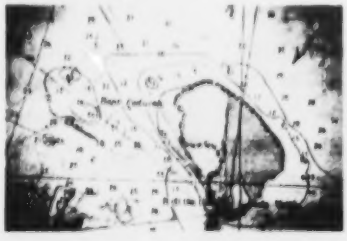

Figure 20 - Modern nautical chart of Bay of Veracruz

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US BRIG SOMERS (1842 - 1846)

Preliminary Scale Map
Veracruz, Veracruz, Mexico
July 1990

U.S. National Park Service
Submerged Cultural Resources Unit
National Maritime Initiative

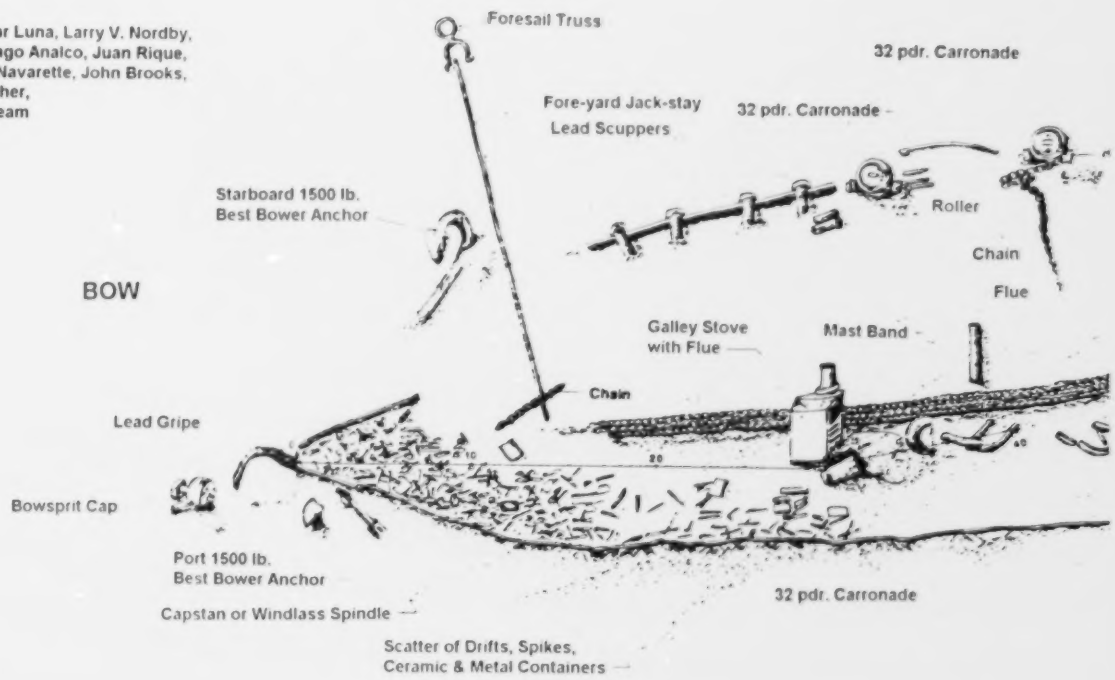
Instituto Nacional de Anthropologia E Historia de Mexico

Armada de Mexico

Somers Discovery Group

Divers:
James P. Delgado, Dr. Pilar Luna, Larry V. Nordby,
Jerry L. Livingston, Santiago Analco, Juan Rique,
Capt. J.E. Suarez Beredo Navarette, John Brooks,
George Belcher, Joel Belcher,
Armada de Mexico Dive Team

Artists:
Jerry L. Livingston
Larry V. Nordby



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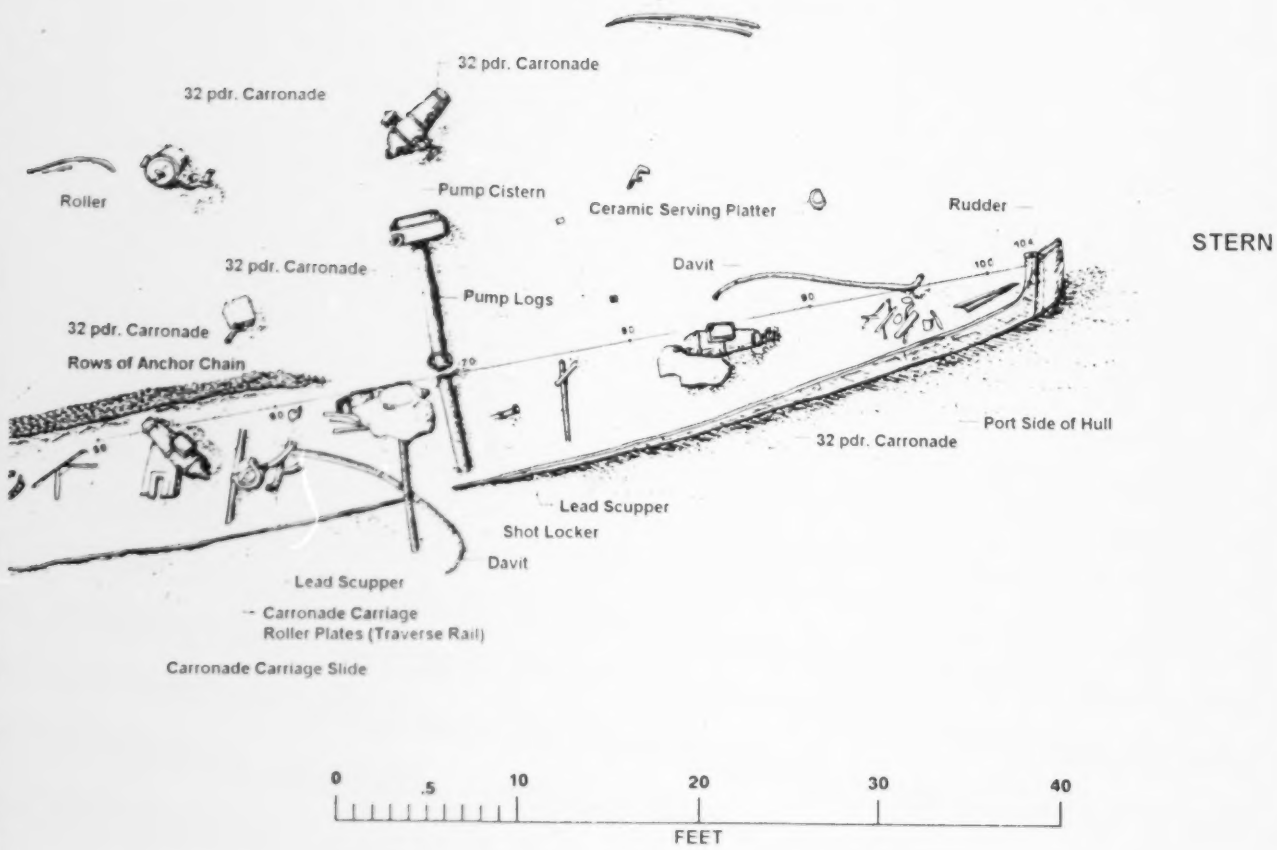

Figure 23 - Preliminary Scale Map, U.S. Brig Somers, July, 1990

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The Mutiny, Herman Melville & Billy Budd

When the *U.S. Brig Somers* sailed from New York on September 13, 1842, one of the officers aboard her was 18 year old midshipman Philip Spencer. He was the scapegrace son of then Secretary of War John Canfield Spencer, and had a short but notorious Naval career of drunken behavior and brawls. Young Spencer was not welcomed aboard *Somers* by either Captain Mackenzie or his officers. Even before *Somers* sailed, Mackenzie had tried unsuccessfully to have Spencer removed from the ship's roster.

Because of his father's influence, midshipman Spencer remained aboard *Somers* despite Mackenzie's protests. But Captain Mackenzie warned the other officers - he was related to four of them - to be careful of Spencer, to give the newcomer a wide berth.

Midshipman Spencer began to associate freely with the crew and apprentices, spending little time with the officers. He courted the crew's friendship, occasionally throwing coins on the deck for the young crew members. Ignoring naval regulations, midshipman Spencer would give tobacco to the crew, cursing Captain Mackenzie behind his back, calling him "a damned old granny" and "a damned old humbug".

After two months at sea, either through immaturity or malice, Spencer began to talk of mutiny and piracy. Spencer finally went too far in asking James Wales, the purser's steward, if he feared death, if he was afraid of a dead man, of killing a man. Spencer then reportedly confided a plan for the murder of Captain Mackenzie and the other officers. The *Somers* would be converted into a pirate ship!

The plot, or Spencer's fantasy, was uncovered the following morning when Wales told the ship's steward who told second-in-command Guert Gansevoort of the conspiracy to take over the ship. Gansevoort rushed to Captain Mackenzie's cabin with the news, and in that tiny space at the *Somers's* stern, Captain Mackenzie received the news "with great coolness" as Gansevoort later remembered.

Captain Mackenzie later testified that:

I was under the impression that Mr. Spencer had been reading some piratical stories and had amused himself with Mr. Wales. However, this was joking on an improper theme.

Captain Mackenzie ordered Lt. Gansevoort to keep a lookout on Spencer "least there should be a shadow of reality in this project". Spencer's behavior had been suspicious throughout the day, and finally when Lt. Gansevoort noticed Spencer high in the rigging, he later testified:

I immediately caught his eye, which he kept staring upon me for more than a minute, with the most infernal expression I have ever seen upon a human face. It satisfied me at once of the man's guilt.

After Lt. Gansevoort's report and recommendation that Spencer be secured, Captain Mackenzie took a graver view and planned a course of action. As evening approached, the captain's order was relayed that officers and warrant officers assemble on the quarterdeck and all crew assemble at their stations forward of the mainmast. Captain Mackenzie approached midshipman Spencer.

I learn, Mr. Spencer, that you aspire to the command of the Somers.

Oh, no, sir.

Did you not tell Mr. Wales, sir, that you had a project to kill the commander, the officers, and a considerable portion of the crew of this vessel and convert her into a pirate?

I may have told him so, sir, but it was in joke.

This, sir, is joking on a forbidden subject; this joke may cost you your life. Arrest Mr. Spencer and put him in double irons.

Figure 24 - Illustration from 'The Mutiny On The Somers' by John R. Spears, February, 1901

Two other crew members, boatswain's mate Samuel Cromwell and seaman Elijah Small, were later arrested and put in irons. After deliberations all day, a council of the ship's officers led by Lt. Gansevoort delivered the verdict:

If any person in the navy shall make or attempt to make any mutinous assembly, he shall, on conviction thereof by a court martial, suffer death.

On December 1, 1842, midshipman Spencer, boatswain's mate Cromwell and seaman Small stood under the yardarm of the *Somers*, nooses around their necks (see Figure 24). Spencer and Small were on one side of the yardarm and Cromwell on the other. Seaman Elijah Small spoke first:

Now brother topmates, give me a quick and easy death. I do forgive you, Mr. Spencer. May God Almighty forgive you also. I am now ready to die, Mr. Spencer, are you?

The large boatswain's mate Samuel Cromwell's last words rang loud and clear:

God of the Universe, look down upon my poor wife. Tell my wife I die an innocent man.

Spencer's last words were:

You may think that I'm not a brave man. You can judge for yourself whether I die like a coward or a brave man. As these are the last words I have to say, I trust they will be believed. Cromwell is innocent!

Spencer asked if he could give the order to fire the cannon, the signal to haul on the ropes. But then, after a long silence, Spencer asked the captain to give the order. Captain Mackenzie cried "Fire!", and the cannon thundered.

Captain Mackenzie delivered a pious lecture to the remaining crew members, many of whom were weeping. The crew was ordered to give three cheers for the American flag. They were then piped down to dinner while the bodies of the three men were left to swing above them in the wind.

After dinner, the bodies were elaborately prepared for burial. Small and Cromwell were sewn into their hammocks, cannon shot as weights at their feet, the last stitch put through their nose as custom demanded. As an officer, Philip Spencer was placed in a weighted coffin, made from wood taken from wardroom mess chests.

At dusk, they were ceremoniously lowered into the sea.

Nearly fifty years later, Herman Melville would end his last novel, *Billy Budd*, with a poem, "Billy In The Darbies". The last lines of the poem describe Billy Budd's burial at sea.

I remember Taff the Welshman when he sank,
And his cheek it was like the budding pink.
But me they'll lash in hammock, drop me deep.
Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep.
I feel it stealing now. Sentry, are you there?
Just ease these darbies at the wrist, and roll me over fair,
I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.

The Controversy

The controversy surrounding the *Somers* mutiny and the hangings began shortly after the *U.S. Brig Somers* arrived back in New York on December 14, 1842.

On Sunday, December 18, the *New York Herald* reported:

We can hardly find language to express our admiration of the conduct of Commander Mackenzie.

By Monday evening, December 19, the same newspaper, the *Herald*, was stating:

In such circumstances a great difference of opinion exists as to the necessity and legality of Mackenzie's conduct...It also appears that there was no court martial...the officers would seem to have acted under a panic.

Questions arose. Had there truly been a mutiny attempt? Was there a real threat to the officers of the *Somers*?

Influential citizens rallied to Captain Mackenzie's defense, among them Richard Henry Dana, Jr. (see Figure 25), the maritime attorney and author of *Two Years Before The Mast*. James Fenimore Cooper (see Figure 26), public figure and popular author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, railed against Mackenzie, declared him a tyrant and a murderer. Cooper, in his 1844 pamphlet, *The Cruise of the Somers*, condemned the actions of Mackenzie as "disgraceful", "outrageous" and "unmanly".

Other questions came to mind. Had this been an example of privileged military arrogance overriding human rights? Did a naval commander have the right to hang his men, even if they were guilty? What rights did sailors have as citizens? Were there really justifications for the hangings?

In fact, the accused mutineers had not even been allowed to speak in their own defense before the so-called drumhead assembly of officers that decided their fate. Congress had

Figure 25
Richard Henry Dana.

Figure 26 - James Fenimore Cooper, steel engraving by H.B. Hall after daguerreotype by Brady.Collection of the New-York Historical Society.

passed a law in 1800 stating that if any person in the Navy made or attempted to make a mutinous assembly, he would, on conviction by a court martial, be given the death sentence. However, a ship's captain did not have the right to convene a court martial. Only the President of the United States, the Secretary of the Navy or the Commander-in-Chief of a fleet or squadron in foreign service had that right.

Captain Mackenzie's justification was that although the officers of the *Somers* were not an official court martial, under the dangerous circumstances of a threatened mutiny, the *Somers's* officers could be considered a reasonable substitute for a court martial and thus act accordingly.

At his own court martial in March, 1843, Captain Mackenzie was tried on five charges. Two of the charges, "unnecessary cruelty" and "conduct unbecoming an officer", had been dropped during the trial. He was acquitted of the other three charges, "oppression", "illegal punishment" and "murder" by a verdict of "not proven."

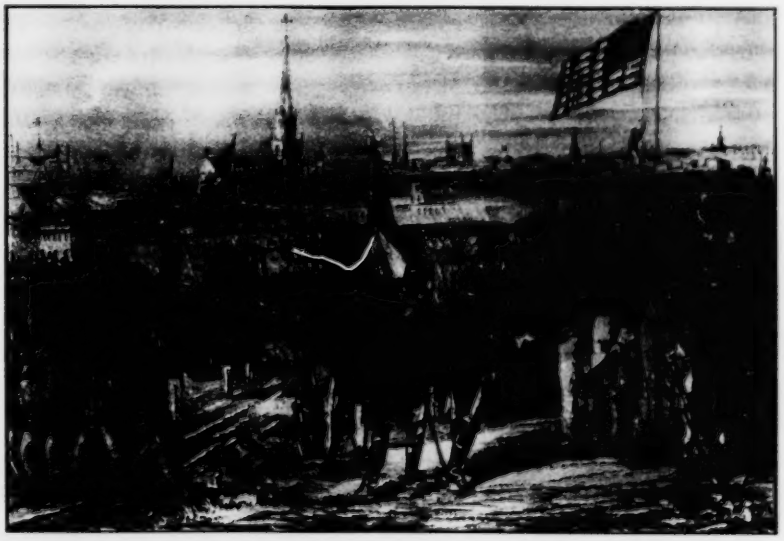

Figure 29 - 'Surrender of Veracruz', lithograph, circa 1847.

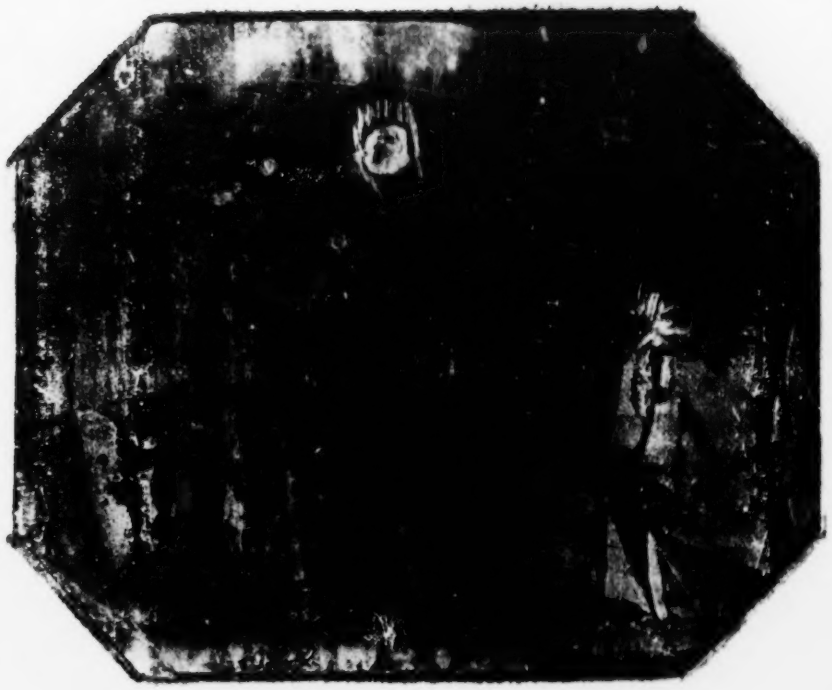

Figure 28
'Lieutenant Abner
Doubleday With
Unidentified Mexicans.'
daguerreotype, circa 1847

The Mexican War

As Jim Delgado says in ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship***:

The Mexican War which lasted from 1846 to 1848 was a particularly bitter war, at least as far as the Mexicans are concerned. It's a war that for Mexicans was the War of North American Aggression, or the first intervention by the United States.

The Mexican War is not well known in the United States. Compared to the Civil War, there have been few books or studies. It was the "baptism by fire" for many of the military leaders of the Civil War that followed only thirteen years later.

Young officers who fought together in Mexico against Mexicans would fight against each other in the next bloody war: Grant and Lee; Beauregard and McClellan; Johnston and Hooker; Hancock and Pickett; Thomas and Bragg; Porter and Jackson; Winslow and Semmes.

Figure 27 - Brevet Second
Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant

General Ulysses S. Grant (see Figure 27), a young lieutenant during the Mexican War, would later call the U.S. invasion of Mexico "the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation".

The new medium of photography had just been discovered in 1839, and the Mexican War was the first war to be photographed. It was also the first war in history to be reported on by the press in an organized and comprehensive way.

Rare daguerreotypes from the Amon Carter Museum's publication, *Eyewitness to War - Prints and Daguerreotypes of the Mexican War, 1846-1848,* give us a glimpse into the past and of some of the men who fought in the Mexican War: General Wool and his troops in Saltillo, Mexico; American volunteer infantry troops also in Saltillo; and a young artillery lieutenant, Abner Doubleday - the inventor of baseball, a student of Spanish literature who obviously made friends in Mexico (see Figure 28).

Figure 31 - Illustration, 'Storming of the Castle of Chapultepec by the American Army Under General Scott'.

On March 9, 1847, in one of the most daring and successful amphibious operations in U.S. military history, more than 10,000 American troops were landed ashore south of the walled city of Veracruz. After the formal surrender of Veracruz on March 29, American troops entered the city to the music of "Yankee Doodle" (see Figure 29).

Veracruz would remain under U.S. control for the next 16 months and serve as the base for the American advance on Mexico City. The United States Army marched and fought on towards Mexico's capital and the final bloody battles of Churubusco, Molina del Rey, Chapultepec and the assault on Mexico City.

Chapultepec, the "Hill of the Grasshopper", rises nearly 200 feet above the plains of Mexico City. A monument at the entrance to Chapultepec is dedicated to "Los Niños Héroes", or the Young Heros (see Figure 30). Chapultepec was the site of Mexico's Military college, their West Point. Each of the six white columns of the monument represents one of the six teenage cadets who died "fighting like demons" when U.S. troops captured Chapultepec on September 13, 1847. Choosing death before surrender, one cadet, clutching the Mexican flag, leaped to the rocks below (see Figures 31 & 32).

Figure 30 - Monument to 'Los Niños Héroes', entrance to Chapultepec Park, Mexico City.

Figure 32 - Statues of six Mexican cadets ('Los Niños Héroes'), Chapultepec Castle, Mexico City.

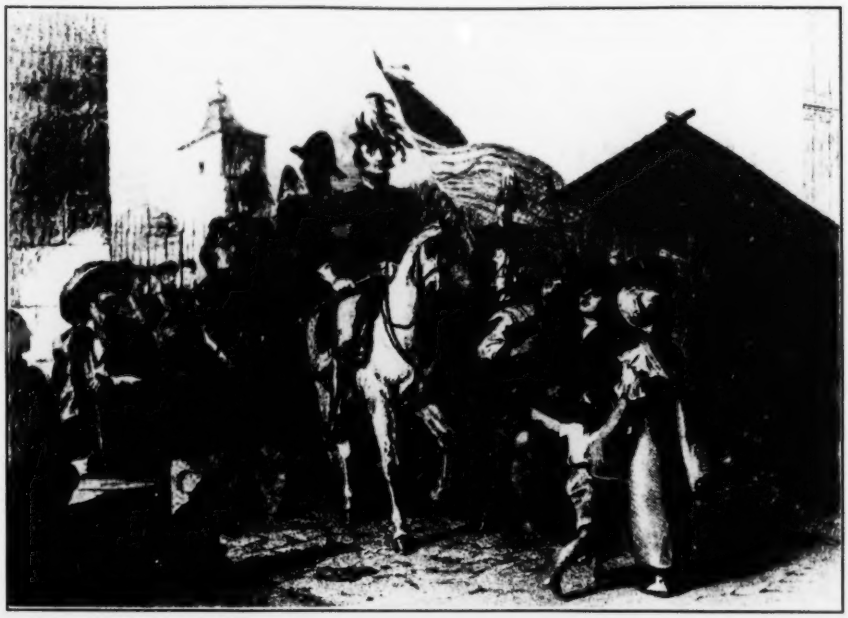

Figure 33 - 'General Scott Entering the City of Mexico', steel engraving, circa 1847-48.

Figure 35 - Monument in Veracruz to slain Mexican soldiers who died for their country in 1914.

When U.S. General Winfield Scott rode victoriously into the Mexico City Zocalo on September 14, 1847 (see Figure 33), a shadow of scorn and distrust fell over relations between Mexico and the United States that still shades those relations today. As the Mexican proverb says: "Poor Mexico! So far from God, so close to the United States".

The American troops would occupy Mexico City for nine months; and on March 10, 1848, the U.S. Senate ratified the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican War. In the peace settlement that followed, Mexico lost half of its territory. The United States paid $15,000,000 to Mexico for the territory she ceded to the U.S., land that would become Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah and significant parts of Wyoming and Colorado.

In 1914, the United States would send troops into Mexico for the second time. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, eager to oust the dictatorial Mexican president Huerta, ordered the occupation of Veracruz. An incident in Tampico, Mexico involving the arrest of U.S. sailors was Wilson's excuse. Two hundred Mexican soldiers and 21 U.S. marines would eventually die in the fighting in Veracruz (see Figures 34 & 35).

Figure 34 - 'Rebel Soldiers Driven Into American Lines By Federals Being Taken To Fort San Juan de Ulua By American Marines, Veracruz, Mexico', photograph by F. Brooke, August, 1914

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Underwater Archaeology

Although underwater salvage work occurred over the past several hundred years utilizing the skills of "free" divers and using "primitive" diving gear like diving bells and diving suits, the invention of a self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA) quickly made the shallow waters of the world's oceans, lakes and rivers accessible to both sport divers, treasure hunters and professional archaeologists. In 1948, Captain Jacques Cousteau led a team of French divers using scuba gear for the first time on an underwater archaeological site off the Tunisian coast of North Africa.

Concern over the destruction of invaluable historical and archaeological underwater sites prompted the development of a new field called underwater archaeology, marine archaeology or maritime archaeology. In an attempt to educate the diving public about the proper methods of exploration, recovery and preservation of underwater sites and artifacts, professional historians and archaeologists taught classes, wrote books and published papers on their development of new methods and techniques for proper underwater archaeological work. A few early pioneers in this field like Jacques Cousteau, Mendel Peterson, George Bass and Peter Throckmorton laid the foundation for future underwater archaeologists to build upon.

Two professional underwater archaeologists participate in the *Somers* documentary film (see Figure 36). Dr. Mitch Marken, who received his doctorate degree from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, describes the *Somers* shipwreck:

The wreck is an archaeologist's dream because so much of her structure is still there. It is a ship of historic importance, lying undisturbed on the seabed for almost 150 years, with her cannons and equipment in disarray, but apparently intact.

James Delgado, an underwater archaeologist trained at East Carolina University and currently the Executive Director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum, has written:

The discovery of the Somers is a discovery of exceptional significance to U.S. history. The Somers is believed to be the best and one of the only shipwrecks found of its historical period, the 1840's. Were the wreck in U.S. waters, it most probably would be listed as a National Historic Landmark.

James Delgado, in **The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship**, summarizes the importance of underwater archaeology as it relates to the *U.S. Brig Somers* shipwreck:

Studying ships of war is a unique and fascinating part of underwater archaeology that gives you a chance to look at intensely focused moments in which people are literally sailing out to fight, perhaps to die. Looking at ships of war like the Somers is important because we have written records that tell us something about the ship, but the archaeological record will tell us more. It's important to take a look down on the bottom at the Somers, lying on her side with everything exactly where it should be. We can look at the rig, we can determine from the surviving documents and plans and what we see down there a bit more about the story of the ship, and by doing so, a little more about the United States at a time when it was truly coming into its own as an international power.

Today, any student interested in pursuing the field of underwater archaeology has a choice of numerous institutions that offer graduate programs. The October 1995 Society for Historical Archaeology newsletter (Volume 28 Number 3) lists the following schools that offer graduate programs in historical archaeology and classes in underwater archaeology:

Figure 36 - James Delgado and Dr. Mitch Marken.

University of Arkansas;
University of Arizona;
Boston University;
Brown University;
University of California, Los Angeles;
Columbia University;
East Carolina University, Greenville;
University of Florida;
Georgia Southern University;
University of Georgia;
University of Haifa, Israel;
University of Idaho;
Louisiana State University;
University of Manitoba, Canada;
University of Maryland, College Park;
University of Massachusetts, Amherst;
Michigan State University;
Michigan Technological University;
University of Nebraska, Lincoln;
University of Nevada, Reno;
State University of New York, Binghamton;
State University of New York, Buffalo;
University of Pennsylvania;
University of St. Andrews, Scotland;
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia;
Sonoma State University;
University of South Carolina;
University of Stockholm, Sweden;
Texas A & M University;
Washington University, St. Louis;
University of West Florida;
Western Michigan University;
College of William and Mary.

This guide to graduate programs is not complete and will be updated periodically. The address for the Society for Historical Archaeology is P.O. Box 30446, Tucson, AZ 85751.

Characters In The Documentary Film - 19th Century

Boatswain's Mate Samuel Cromwell Cromwell was the chief boatswain's mate aboard the *U.S. Brig Somers*. He was in his mid-30's, burly and by far the largest man on the ship. He was also the most feared for his temper. He was disliked by many of the *Somers's* crew. Cromwell was in charge of carrying out the floggings with the colt and the cat-o'-nine-tails. He was described as "striking with all his might as though it was pleasing to him to whip them".

He had married shortly before sailing, and Cromwell's last words before hanging were:

God of the Universe, look down upon my poor wife. Tell my wife I die an innocent man.

Before midshipman Philip Spencer was hanged, he was reported to have said:

As these are the last words I have to say, I trust they will be believed. Cromwell is innocent!

First Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort Gansevoort was the second-in-command of the *Somers*. He was from a famous family of Albany, New York. He was Herman Melville's first cousin - Guert's father was the brother of Melville's mother, Maria Gansevoort. Lt. Gansevoort presided over the shipboard assembly of officers that sentenced the three men to hang on the *Somers*. The burden of that responsibility seems to have plagued Gansevoort the remainder of his life. He died in 1868, retired with the rank of Commodore, described by a contemporary as "a sad wreck of his former self".

Passed Assistant Surgeon Richard Leecock Leecock was the *Somers's* doctor during the ill-fated voyage in 1842. He had been a member of the group of officers that decided the fate of the three alleged mutineers. Three days after Captain Mackenzie was acquitted at Mackenzie's court martial in March, 1843. Richard Leecock committed suicide aboard the *Somers* by shooting himself above the right eye. In his novel, *Voyage To The First Of December*, the author Henry Carlisle uses Leecock as his central character in a fictionalized account of the *Somers* mutiny story.

Commander Alexander Slidell Mackenzie - Captain Mackenzie was a well educated and well travelled minor literary figure of his time. He had won recognition for his travel books, *A Year In Spain* (1829), *The American In England* (1835) and *Spain Revisited* (1834). He also wrote *Popular Essays On Naval Subjects* (1833), *The Life of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry* (1840) and *The Life of John Paul Jones* (1841).

He was a friend of many literary figures of the 19th century, to include Washington Irving, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In his book, *A Year In Spain*, Mackenzie wrote of witnessing a public hanging of two robbers in Madrid, Spain. The experience for him was "of deep and painful interest".

After his court martial acquittal in 1843, he continued his career in the Navy. The Spanish speaking Mackenzie served as special envoy for President Polk in 1846 to negotiate Santa Anna's return from Cuba to Mexico. He acted as interpreter at the surrender of Veracruz in 1847 and commanded the *USS Mississippi* as his final naval service. He died at his home in Tarrytown, New York on September 13, 1848 of a heart attack at age 45.

Figure 38 - Herman Melville, 1885

Herman Melville - Melville was born in New York City in 1819. At eighteen, he signed on the packet ship St. Lawrence and sailed to Liverpool. This first experience before the mast led Melville to sail from Fairhaven, Massachusetts in 1841 bound for the Pacific. This voyage to the South Seas on the whaling ship Acushnet would leave Melville (see Figure 37) with experiences, adventures and lessons of life that live on today in his books: *Typee* (1846); *Omoo* (1847); *Mardi* and *Redburn* (1849); *White-Jacket* (1850) and finally the great classic, *Moby-Dick* (1851).

Figure 37
Herman Melville, circa 1847

America's greatest writer of the 19th century was the cousin of the *Somers's* second-in-command, Lt. Guert Gansevoort. Influenced by his cousin's role as head of the "drumhead" assembly of officers who decided the fate of the three hanged aboard the *Somers,* Herman Melville would use the *Somers* mutiny affair as the inspiration for his last work.

Seated at his writing desk in New York, Herman Melville (see Figure 38) finished this story five months before he died in 1891. The manuscript of this novella was stored away in an old tin bread box. It was finally discovered thirty years later by the scholar Raymond Weaver and published in 1924.

This masterpiece, *Billy Budd,* told the story of a young sailor who was falsely accused of mutiny and was tried and convicted and hanged from the yardarm (see Figure 39).

Midshipman Robert C. Rogers - Rogers was transferred to the *Somers* two weeks before she capsized off Veracruz in 1846. He described in his memoirs written in 1890 how during a storm at night aboard the *Somers,* he had climbed high in the rigging to find out why his men were not lowering sails. He asked the captain of the top why no one was reefing the sails:

I scarce heard his reply, but followed his finger pointing to the weather yardarm. "Spencer and Small", he said, "Don't you see 'em?"

Rogers admits as he peered through the darkness:

My very fears did really for a moment persuade me that I saw Spencer's ghost.

A few days before the *Somers* heeled over off Veracruz, midshipman Rogers was captured ashore by the Mexicans. He and acting ship surgeon Dr. Wright had volunteered for a night reconnaissance to the Veracruz beach, and Rogers was captured. On July 31, 1847, eight months later, Rogers escaped from Mexico City and reunited with the American forces in Puebla. Rogers, in 1890, published "Some Reminiscences of Philip Spencer and the *Brig Somers"* (see bibliography).

Figure 39 - *Billy Budd,* edited by Frederick Barron Freeman, Harvard University Press, 1949

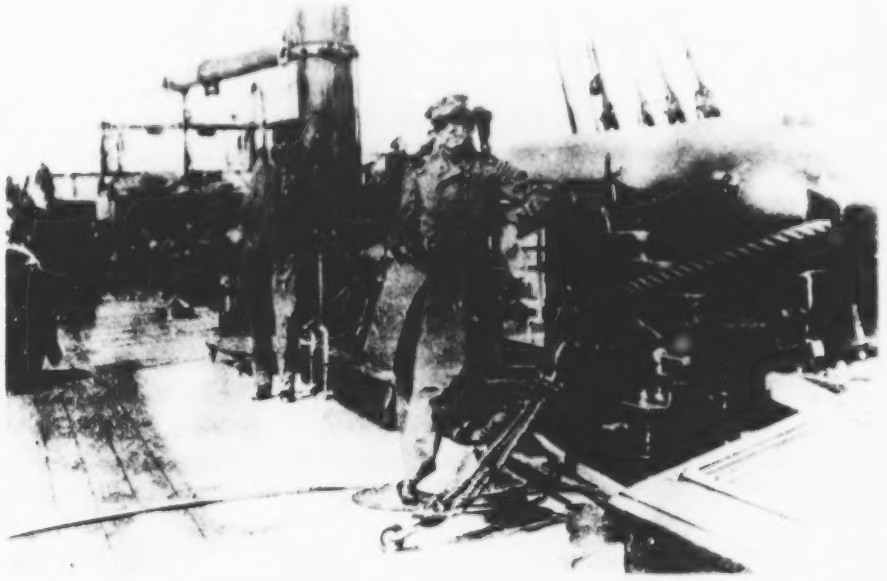

Figure 40 - Captain Raphael Semmes aboard the CSS *Alabama* at Capetown, South Africa, August, 1863

Figure 41 - 'The Fight Between The Alabama and The Kearsarge', June 19, 1864, Cherbourg, France.'

Lt. Commander Raphael Semmes - The last captain of the *Somers* when she capsized off Veracruz would go on to become one of the heroes of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Born in Maryland, he became a naval officer in 1832 and a practicing attorney three years later. Back in the Navy, he was assigned to the Pensacola Navy Yard in 1841 and moved his family to Alabama.

Lt. Commander Semmes of the *Somers* would become Admiral Semmes of the Confederacy. Notorious in the North, he became famous in the South as commander of the *CSS Alabama*, a Confederate man-of-war (see Figure 40). On the *Alabama*, Admiral Raphael Semmes sank, ransomed or captured over 65 U.S. merchant ships between August 1862 to June 1864. In a famous Civil War naval battle, the *Alabama* was sunk by the Union ship *Kearsarge* off Cherbourg, France on June 19, 1864 (see Figure 41).

A naval officer, lawyer, university English professor, newspaper editor and writer, he was a great character of the 19th century. After the Civil War, Semmes retired to Mobile, Alabama and practiced law (see Figure 42). A statue of Semmes (see Figure 43) and a hotel named after him in Mobile are tributes to his southern patriotism.

Figure 42 - Admiral Rafael Semmes

Seaman Elijah Small - Small, 30 years old, was the smallest man aboard the *Somers*. He initially was the ship's quartermaster, but three weeks into the voyage, Small had been demoted to seaman for "carelessness of duty" and "disobedience of orders".

Midshipman Spencer had loaned seaman Small fifteen dollars the day the *Somers* had sailed. Their friendship grew during the voyage as they could converse together in Spanish. Small claimed to have sailed on a slave ship, and Spencer, fascinated with tales of piracy, must have shown great interest in Small's stories.

When Elijah Small stood under the *Somers's* yardarm, a noose around his neck, his last words were:

I do forgive you, Mr. Spencer. May God Almighty forgive you also.

Then Small spoke to Captain Mackenzie:

You are right, sir. You are doing your duty, and I honor you for it. God bless that flag and prosper it.

It is interesting to note that Melville, in *Billy Budd*, has Billy say as his last words:

God Bless Captain Vere!

U.S. Brig Somers - The *Somers* was launched on April 16, 1842 at the New York Navy Yard (also called the Brooklyn Navy Yard). Designed by Samuel Humphreys based on the Baltimore Clipper model, she was designed for speed and was a small vessel. The *Somers* measured 102 feet overall, 25 feet at the beam and had a depth of hold of 11 feet.

The *U.S. Brig Somers* was named for Lt. Richard M. Somers III, USN (1778-1804). On September 4, 1804, Lt. Richard Somers, in command of the U.S. Navy ketch *Intrepid*, was killed with his crew as the *Intrepid* blew up in the harbor of Tripoli on the Barbary Coast of North Africa (modern day Tarabulus in Libya). The *Intrepid* had been loaded with 100 barrels of powder and 150 mortar shells in an attempt to destroy the Tripoli fleet and city defenses. Lt. Somers and his crew were supposed to have lit the fuses and escaped in a small boat. All died when the *Intrepid* either blew up accidently or was purposely blown up by Lt. Somers to prevent her capture by the enemy.

Figure 43 - Statue of Admiral Rafael Semmes, Mobile, Alabama

Midshipman Philip Spencer - The 18 year old midshipman Spencer was the son of the U.S. Secretary of War John Canfield Spencer. Young Spencer's short naval career had been one of drunken, rebellious behavior. Early in 1846, he had slugged a midshipman aboard the *North Carolina*. In May, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he was dismissed in disgrace from the *USS John Adams* for being drunk. He had threatened to shoot an English officer.

Philip Spencer was described as a good looking young man, tall, slender, well-spoken and well-mannered. However, an affliction that caused his eyes to diverge - the opposite of cross-eyed - made him different from others. He suffered through an extremely painful operation to correct his eye problem, but with no success.

While at Union College in Schenectady, New York in 1841, Spencer helped found the national collegiate fraternity, Chi Psi. The members of Chi Psi still remember Philip Spencer with a drinking song:

Oh, here's to Philip Spencer
Who when about to die,
When sinking down beneath the waves
Loud shouted out, Chi Psi.

So fill your glasses to the brim
And drink with manly pride
Humanity received a blow
When Philip Spencer died.

Figure 44 - George and Joel Belcher

Characters In The Documentary Film - 20th Century

Captain Edward L. Beach, USN (Ret.) - A decorated submarine commander in WW II, retired Captain Beach is the best selling author of *Run Silent, Run Deep; Keepers of the Sea; Scapegoats; The U.S. Navy - 200 Years* and other books and articles on seafaring and the U.S. Navy. In 1966, Captain Beach was the commander of the first nuclear submarine to circumnavigate the globe submerged. He was a 1939 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and served as Naval Aide to President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

George Belcher - George, with his brother Joel (see Figure 44), led the expedition to Veracruz, Mexico that discovered the shipwreck of the *U.S. Brig Somers.* A native of McAllen, Texas, George served with the Peace Corps in Bolivia in 1964-66 and later worked for the Agency For International Development in Vietnam between 1967-71. George Belcher is a veteran diver and underwater explorer. He is an art dealer in Mexican and Latin American paintings in San Francisco where he wrote and directed ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship***.

Joel Belcher - Joel, with his brother George, led the expedition to Veracruz, Mexico that discovered the shipwreck of the *U.S. Brig Somers.* Joel is from McAllen, Texas and is a veteran diver and underwater explorer. Joel and George Belcher were invited in 1992 by the Vietnamese government to explore two 15th century shipwrecks off Vietnam's southern coast in the Gulf of Thailand. An operations supervisor for a Houston oil services company, Joel resides in Tomball, Texas.

Peter Coyote - A veteran Hollywood actor in films like *Jagged Edge; Man In Love; Outrageous Fortune; E.T.;* and *Bitter Moon*, Peter Coyote is the narrator of ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship***. Peter is highly regarded for his narrative skills and has narrated numerous documentary films, to include three National Geographic Specials.

James Delgado - Jim Delgado is an underwater archaeologist, writer and historian. He is the former Maritime Historian for the U.S. National Park Service, and he currently is the Executive Director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum. Jim Delgado trained as an underwater archeologist at East Carolina University, and he has participated in or led several shipwreck expeditions to include the *USS Arizona* at Pearl Harbor, the brig *Somers* in Mexico, the California Gold Rush Steamship *Tennessee* and the sunken fleet of the 1946 atomic bomb tests at Bikini. He is the author of thirteen books and numerous articles to include *Alcatraz Island* (1985); *Shipwrecks at the Golden Gate* (1989); *Pearl Harbor Recalled: New Images of the Day of Infamy* (1991); *Great American Ships* (1991) and most recently, *Beaver: First Steamer on the West Coast.*

Philip McFarland - Philip McFarland is Teacher Emeritus at the Concord Academy in Massachusetts. A writer and historian, he is the author of *Sea Dangers - The Affair of the Somers,* an excellent and thorough investigation of the *Somers* mutiny and the personalities and events of 19th century America that were part of the *Somers* story. He is also the author of *Seasons of Fire* and *Sojourners.*

Mitchell Marken, Ph.D. - Dr. Marken received his doctorate in underwater archaeology from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He is the author of *Pottery From Spanish Shipwrecks 1500-1800*, published by the University Press of Florida in 1994. Dr. Marken is currently the District Office Manager and Senior Archaeologist for Summit Envirosolutions, an environmental assessment and management consulting firm in Reno, Nevada.

Dr. Marken frequently consults on shipwrecks and other submerged site projects such as UCLA/RAINPEG in Guatemala; and the *Lock Tay Cranog*, a submerged Bronze Age site in Scotland. Dr. Marken assisted the Belcher brothers on the *Somers* project in Veracruz, Mexico, and he both participated in and produced a documentary film on the 1992 expedition to Vietnam with George and Joel Belcher which explored two 15th century Thai shipwrecks off the southern coast of Vietnam.

Traditional Music & Sea Shanties

The 19th Century traditional music, songs and sea shanties that are part of the soundtrack of ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship*** were produced by the Seattle, Washington group, *Victory At Sea.*

The following notes by Philip Morgan, Music Director for *Victory At Sea*, briefly describe some of the music, songs and shanties in the documentary film.

1. *Ballad of the Somers* - These verse lyrics were published by Horser Clenling, Esq., Quarter Master, U.S. Navy in the *New York Herald* on May 11, 1843. The words captured the popular sentiments of outrage at the hangings and accurately prophesied the fate that awaited the *Somers.*

2. *Icelandic Hymn* - This haunting melody goes well with our story of a haunted ship.

3. *Burial at Sea* - A new arrangement of the tune to an old pirate song.

4. *New York Gals* - The story of a naive sailor taken advantage of by a "lady of the night" is probably as old as sailing itself. In this song, Jack also gets to make a fashion statement.

5. *Shenandoah* - Originally a rowing shanty of American river boatmen, this song then became a loading shanty on the gulf coast where it was adapted by deep water sailors as a capstan shanty.

6. *Santy Anno* - A shanty about General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna of Mexico, this capstan shanty gives a revisionist version of the battle of Monterrey. Other verses cover topics more dear to the sailor's heart such as whiskey and women.

7. *Philip Spencer* - Before his ill-fated voyage on the *Somers,* Philip Spencer started a fraternity at Union College which exists nationwide today. Here, in all its glory, is the Chi Psi song honoring the martyred founder.

8. *Yankee Doodle* - Originally a mocking British song from revolutionary times, the U.S. Army marched into Veracruz to this tune on March 29, 1847. The military variation in the B part was due to the note limitations of a fife.

9. *Shallow Brown* - One of the most beautiful hauling shanties, and very old, this was originally a slave shanty. "Shallow" is probably really "Challo" from French. Challo Brown was a mulatto woman.

10. *The Gal I Left Behind Me* - This song was popular as a marching song in the Mexican War.

11. *Roll, Alabama, Roll* - Although this shanty is not in the documentary film (but included in the album of the film's soundtrack), it is important because of Raphael Semmes' role in the *Somers* story. The *CSS Alabama* was the most successful of the Confederate commerce raiders, capturing 65 ships in her two years at sea. Her captain, Admiral Raphael Semmes, achieved international celebrity before the *Alabama* was sunk in 1864. Lt. Commander Semmes had given the order to abandon ship before, 18 years earlier, as the last captain of the *Somers.*

The album in CD and cassette of the full vocal and instrumental versions of the traditional music, songs and sea shanties from the soundtrack of ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship*** is available for purchase from:

Victory Music
P.O. Box 7515
Bonney Lake, WA 98390
206-863-6617

Vocabulary & Terminology

Baltimore Clipper - A name given to a type of sail trading vessel that developed in and around Baltimore, Maryland in the mid-1700's. The first were probably sloops, but the schooner rig was quickly adopted. The "Baltimore Clipper" model ships were sharp hulled vessels and fast. The *Somers's* design was based on the Baltimore Clipper style.

Boatswain - Pronounced bo'sun, he is the officer or warrant officer on ship in charge of sails, rigging, cables, anchors, etc. He is in charge of all work on deck. On the *Somers*, boatswain's mate Samuel Cromwell was the one who administered the floggings.

Brail - Using ropes called brails to bring up the sail close to the mast so that it is temporarily furled or rolled up.

Carronade - An important naval innovation of the 19th century, this new type of cannon was first produced by the Carron Company of Scotland in 1776. It was shorter and lighter than earlier guns and had a relatively large bore. It was cast in all calibers, including 12, 18, 24 and 32-pounders, signifying more or less the weight of the iron cannon ball that it fired.

Cat-O'-Nine-Tails - An instrument of punishment used for flogging or whipping sailors on their bare backs. It was usually made of nine lengths of cords each about 18 inches long and each knotted three times. Punishment was limited to no more than 12 lashes at a time, but this regulation was often disregarded.

Chronometer - A marine timekeeper, or large watch, used to help determine Greenwich mean time for the purpose of finding a ship's longitude.

Colt - A three strand rope used as a whip for flogging or punishment; usually reserved for younger crewmen or for lesser offenses instead of the cat-o'-nine-tails.

Darbies - A darby is an old term for handcuffs, hand irons or manacles. Sometimes called "fetters". Herman Melville ends his novel, *Billy Budd*, with a poem *Billy In The Darbies.*

Fathom - A unit of measurement for the depths of the ocean and lengths of rope and cable. It derives from the old English faedm, meaning "to embrace", and it is the distance across the outstretched arms of an average man, approximately six feet. A nautical fathom is six feet.

Fathometer - An instrument used to determine water depth and the contour of the sea floor. Sonic pulses are beamed downward and then reflected back to the surface where the instrument gives a reading of depth and a profile of the bottom.

Magnetometer - A search instrument used by underwater archaeologists and treasure hunters to locate sunken objects and shipwrecks. A magnetometer measures the strength and variations of the earth's magnetic field. Localized concentrations of man-made iron objects create "anomalies" on the ocean bottom that the magnetometer detects. A magnetometer will only detect ferro-magnetic (iron) material, not bronze, copper or gold.

Manifest Destiny - A term first used by John O'Sullivan in 1842. A doctrine of the mid-1800's that promoted the expansion of the United States westward across all of the American continent. The term was a rallying cry for the eventual acquisition of Texas, New Mexico, California and other western territories.

Martinet - A rigid disciplinarian; a military or naval officer who is noted for his strictness of discipline. The word derives from General Martinet, a French drillmaster during the reign of Louis XIV.

Martyr - One who dies for a cause or a belief, or as a consequence of his devotion to an idea or a group. Chi Psi Fraternity members believe that midshipman Philip Spencer was hanged on the *Somers* because he refused to share fraternity secrets written as Greek inscriptions found among his papers.

Mutiny - An insurrection or an attempt by force to go against authority. A refusal to obey the order of a commanding officer. A person found guilty of mutiny was punished by death. The penalty for mutiny in all navies was death by hanging from the yardarm.

Port - The name of the left side of a ship when viewed from aft, or the stern (after part). An old term for port was larboard.

Scourge - A whip or a lash. Melville describes a flogging with "The keen scourge hissed through the wintry air...".

Starboard - The right side of a ship when viewed from the stern or rear of the ship.

Teredo Shipworm - This ocean parasite has plagued sailors and their ships throughout maritime history. The larvae of the shipworm, *teredo navalis,* attach themselves to any available wood where the larvae develops into mollusks. These mollusks eventually bore conical holes into ships' hulls. The shipworm rotates its body to drill into the wood, using small pincerlike shells on its body. The *Somers's* hull was copper sheathed to help protect its wood from the teredo shipworm.

Top-Heavy Ship - A ship, as was the *Somers,* that was over-rigged with too much mast and sparring. When all sails were up, the ship was capable of capsizing. The *Somers* was a top-heavy ship; she was very fast, and eventually did capsize.

Windlass - A capstan-like fitting on a horizontal shaft used for heavy lowering and lifting of the ship's anchors. It is fitted with bars to be worked by crewmen.

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This Educational Guide to the film, ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship***, was written by George Belcher.
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Consultants: James Delgado and Mitch Marken, Ph.D.

Design: Circle Graphics - Thomasin Grim

The film, ***The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship***, was produced by the Somers Documentary Film Project Limited Partnership.

The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship is available for purchase on videocassette accompanied by this Educational Guide. For information on purchases, please write to: Somers Documentary Film, 330 Bret Harte, Reno, Nevada 89509. Or call: 1-800-914-7286

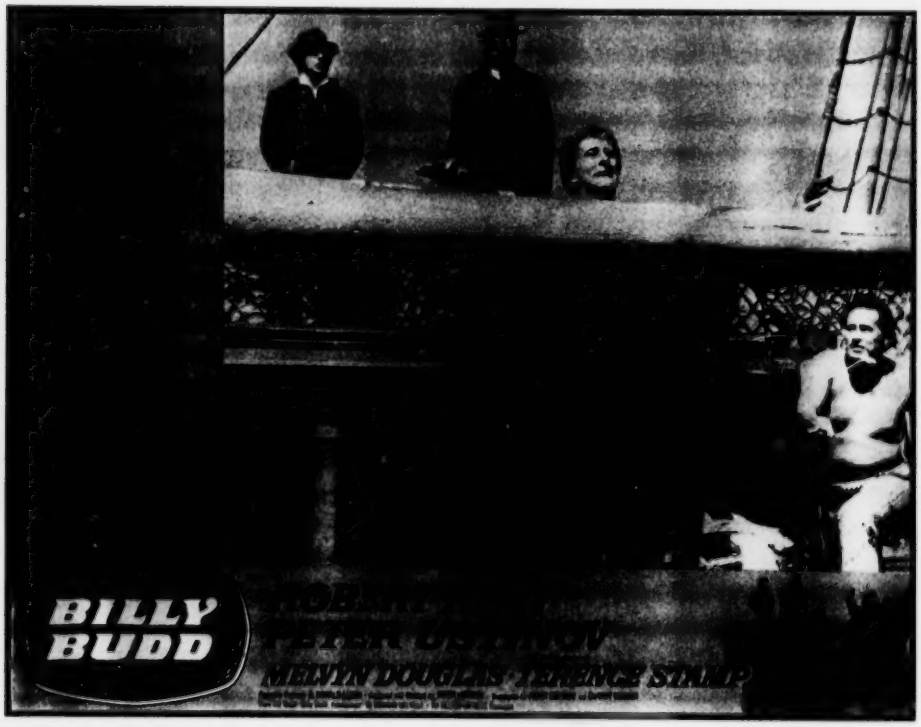

Figure 45

Picture Credits

Figure 1 Map by Thomasin Grim
Figure 2 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 3 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 4 U.S. Naval Academy
Figure 5 Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy
Figure 6 American Antiquarian Society
Figure 7 Chi Psi Fraternity
Figure 8 Collection of The New-York Historical Society
Figure 9 Library of Congress
Figure 10 Museum of the City of Mobile
Figure 11 U.S. Naval Historical Center
Figure 12 Collection: George Belcher
Figure 13 Photography by Paul Wells
Figure 14 Library of Congress
Figure 15 Collection: George Belcher
Figure 16 Collection: George Belcher
Figure 17 U.S. Naval Academy
Figure 18 Collection: George Belcher
Figure 19 Goodwin Library, University of Texas
Figure 20 Defense Mapping Agency
Figure 21 Dr. Mitch Marken
Figure 22 Dr. Mitch Marken
Figure 23 Submerged Cultural Resource Unit, U.S. National Park Service
Figure 24 Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy
Figure 25 Massachusetts Historical Society
Figure 26 Collection of The New-York Historical Society
Figure 27 Library of Congress
Figure 28 Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
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Figure 30 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 31 Library of Congress
Figure 32 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 33 Collection: George Belcher
Figure 34 U.S. Military History Institute
Figure 35 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 36 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 37 Berkshire Athenaeum
Figure 38 Gansevoort-Lansing Collection, New York Public Library
Figure 39 F. Barrie Freeman and The Houghton Library, Harvard University
Figure 40 U.S. Naval Historical Center
Figure 41 U.S. Naval Historical Center
Figure 42 Library of Congress
Figure 43 Photography by George Belcher
Figure 44 Photography by Paul Wells
Figure 45 Collection: George Belcher

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June 11, 1996

George Belcher
Somers Documentary Film Project
74 New Montgomery St., Suite 750
San Francisco, CA 94105

Dear George,

I am writing in response to your request for comments on your entry, *The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship*, in the 1996 National Educational Media Competition. Your entry was judged by a classroom jury at Arroyo High School in San Lorenzo. It was judged in a US History category and ranked first out of four entries, with one other entry receiving a Bronze Apple award. Following is a selection of the students' comments:

What did you like MOST about this video?
"The videotaping -- it was filmed nicely and it explained everything well. I also liked the underwater videos. It really showed what happened to the ship after."

"The whole story was very interesting -- mutiny, murder, ghosts, etc. It was very dramatic, and it drew me in. I also liked how they included Herman Melville. That was cool too."

"The subject; the camerawork; the way they told the story; the way they emphasized the important points. When something interesting happened, they had loud music to go with it."

"I liked the whole story about the ship. I think it's cool that the divers saw ghosts under water."

"The goriness, illustrations, narrator, information and music."

"How it kept the viewer interested with great music, adventure and mystery."

"Excellent. I recommend it for 8th grade to adults."

"The pictures of the ship and all the information I got from this movie. Also, I liked how the video talked about ghosts."

"How they actually talked about the curse."

655 Thirteenth Street
Oakland,CA 94612-1222

(over)

"I liked the sounds that went with the pictures and how they used a ship that looks like the one that sunk. It was very good."

"How it kept my attention with good music and pictures."

What are the things that you did NOT like about this video?
"It was too long. I thought you shouldn't have put in too much extra information."

"I didn't like how long it was. They could have cut out some stuff."

"There was really nothing bad about the video -- it was very interesting."

"Nothing, really. Music could be a little louder to keep viewers more interested. Cut out the news sections."

"The video didn't talk about the curse, it just talked about the history of the ship."

"Nothing, really. Too many big words."

"Well, I liked it all but, only one thing is that it was too long and kind of boring."

"How it had the little intermissions."

What was the message of this video?
"About the curse of a boat called the Somers and what happened to it and how it got the name the "curse" of the Somers."

"It was about the historical ship, Somers."

"To tell us about the curse of the U.S.S. Briggs Somers."

"To talk about the old Somers ship and to tell us about the old time crews."

"The story about the Somers and the curse of the Somers!"

"To give viewers the history of a mysterious ghost ship and what we are doing about it now."

"To tell about the Somers and her mutiny."

"That there really might be a curse."

"It talks about how an innocent man was hung in a ship and that same ship sank on the ocean and now they're trying to find it."

"How to track down a sunken ship that is so important."

What did you learn from this video that you did NOT know before?
"I never even heard about this boat. Now I know a lot about it -- how it got it's name, how it went down, what happened on it, who ran it, etc. etc."

"I learned a lot about the ship Somers, Phillip Spencer, Herman Melville and the mystery that goes along with them."

"I didn't know anything that they talked about."

"I learned about the Somers ghost ship and that anchors are really BIG!"

"All about the USS Somers."

"That you could write under water."

"I learned that researching about old ships is hard."

"That people were wrongly accused on that ship."

"I learned everything because I'd never heard of this story except for the Mexican-American War."

I hope these comments are useful. Despite significant improvements to our judging worksheets to facilitate feedback, it is often difficult with classroom judging to elicit the depth and breadth of comments that we might like from students. I do apologize if they seem a bit brief. If you have additional questions about the judging process, please feel free to contact me.

Best of luck with your projects. I hope to see more of your work in future Competitions.

Sincerely,

Joanne Parsont

Joanne Parsont
Competition Director

stuart hall
for boys

March 29, 1996

Dear Mr. Belcher,

Thank you for sending me a copy of the film, The Curse of the Somers - Billy Budd's Ghost Ship. The class response was excellent and the boys really loved it! Here are only some of the responses I received. I hope they will give you feedback. Thanks again for the video. I look forward to showing it to my classes in the future!

Sincerely yours,

Ms. Madeleine Metzger
5th Grade Teacher

schools of the sacred heart • 2222 broadway, san francisco, ca • 94115
(415) 563-2900 • fax (415) 292-3183 • e-mail: stuarthall@sacred.sf.ca.us

Ryan Batjiaka

march 21, 1996

This movie was amazing, intresting, and awesome. It kept me glued to the screen and on the edge of my seat. There was never a dull moment. The music in the background really helped living the movie alive. I would recommend this movie to anybody who has been on the C.A. Player.

Tonight when I get home, I'm going to look the boomers up in my electronic encyclopedia since I'm so intrested. Thank you very much for letting us watch it

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Charlie Vaughan March 21, 1996

The Case of the Somers

1. I like it the way they tell every detail about the Somers.

2. I like how it told the ghost story about the bodies that head been killed.

3. I liked how it told how each person died.

4 I also like how they told ~~them~~ ~~they~~ the way they found the Somers.

5. I really like how they made it so spooky.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Tommy Imboden March 21, 1996

Somers

This movie is good for 5th graders because it has very many facts, important facts about history. It is very interesting to learn about ships. They give lots of information about the people who served on deck, and after their ~~to~~ time spent on the Somers. It tells if they wrote stories, which most of them did, if they survived.

Most of the movie is about the Somers being a haunted ghost ship. It says many people have seen the ghosts of Spencer, Small, and the other on board. Or heard voices down on deck.

This is very exciting and has a very tragick background with all the deaths on board and occured while she went down. It had very interesting maps. And told about the war between U.S. and Mexico.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Charles Bisesto March 21, 1996.

This is a good movie because it is a documentary and it teaches you alot.
This is also a very good movie for 5th graders cause it is a mystery and most 5th graders like that.
This is also a very fascinating story that keeps you watching.
It is also very scary and you don't know what's going to happen next.
Also I know I like stories about ghosts and is very interesting.
Somers is also a very catchy name.
Also the story or movie does not get boring like other movies.
I really liked this documentary.
It was really good as you can see with all the reasons above. More Reasons
I also like violence in movies, and movies with a bad guy. I know most 5th graders likes that too.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Swag B. Positive March 25, 1996

1. It is educational in history.
2. It is exciting and fun to watch.
3. Kids will like it because of its scariness. It makes us kids want to watch it because we want to ~~know~~ know what will happen next.
4. It teaches us geography.
5. It teaches us a lot of tools that they use to find sunken ships and other things.
6. It is very exciting because of their scariness.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Matthew Lee March 21, 1996

I think the movie is good for fifth graders because it is educational. It is also a mystery. The movie is also fit for pre-adolescents like ourselves. The movie about the Somers is my opinion is exciting in many ways. I also like the way that they described the sinking, finding and recovery of the ship.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE